

DUDUZILE MTSHAHO:

Good morning, friends. Welcome back. We are still continuing with worship and exploring around the theme. I would like to introduce to you a friend of a friend, Marion McNaughton, a grandmother of two and another one to come! She has been a tutor at Woodbrooke, but now she is doing much more important work, having retired she is now a volunteer gardener at Woodbrooke! Talk about caring for the earth. We are going to worship and when Marion is ready she will rise to the podium and will give us her message. May we then Friends go into worship.

MARION McNAUGHTON ADDRESSED THE TRIENNIAL AS FOLLOWS

Doreen's ministry to us this morning in our morning worship touched on many of the things that I have been thinking and praying about in the last few months as I prepared what I wanted to say to you today. When she sent me her text I realised that she and I had been drawn to speak along very similar lines which of course is not surprising, but is always wonderful when it happens. So I invite you to stay in the place that she brought us to so we may explore it more deeply.

I believe that we are part of a very long tradition of being a people of God. It has its roots in the Jewish tradition. Jesus who was a Jew carried many of the elements of his tradition into the new Christian world and we as Quakers carry all this forward in a very special way today. To understand prophecy we must understand where we come from.

Many people have helped me understand this over the last year and I would like to thank them. Rabbi Margaret Jacobi of the Birmingham Progressive Synagogue for her knowledge of the Hebrew prophets, Rabbi James Baaden for his understanding of the ending of Jewish prophecy. Timothy Peat Ashworth of Woodbrooke for his insights into the early Christian communities and my colleagues on Britain Yearly Meeting Testimonies Committee who more than anyone else have taught me what it is to live faithful prophetic lives.

I would like to begin with the elements that are there in what we are naming as prophecy.

- In both Jewish and Christian theology prophecy is understood as a spontaneous human response to a transforming encounter with God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- The response can take the form of words, signs, actions or a way of life.
- It can be exercised by men, women, children, individuals or groups. It is a gift from God, it speaks God's truth.
- It is rooted in known values, the religious values of its community.
- It pinpoints the behaviours, attitudes and events that reveal where a people or a ruler are being faithful and where they have gone astray.
- It affirms and it criticises.
- It warns of the consequences of continuing on the wrong path, it foretells disasters. So the prophet both belongs and challenges. It calls repeatedly for what is known in the Hebrew tradition as Teshuvah, turning: turning away from the world and returning to God.

- It is awesome and unmistakable. We hear the voice of God. We should not use the word prophecy lightly or seek to be comfortable with it. Prophecy is always challenging and usually uncomfortable.

Our task this week is going to be to find the prophetic voice for our time. So I would like to look briefly at the prophetic tradition we stand in and what riches and contradictions it brings with it.

I shall begin with the Hebrew tradition, because this is where it began for us, and this was the tradition that Jesus inherited. Then I shall look at how prophecy died away in the Jewish tradition, but came alive in the ministry of Jesus and then again in the early Christian communities. And then see how we as Quakers practise and affirm prophecy and what our prophetic calling might be as a people of God.

I will also be asking, because this is important to me in my own life, why prophecy has so often failed or proved to be ineffective. We know that prophets encounter resistance and apathy. The prophet Ezekiel was told by God, “I send you to them and you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God.’ And whether they hear or refuse to hear for they are a rebellious breed they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

People do know when there has been a prophet among them, but that does not mean they do what the prophet tells them. The prophet Jeremiah, one of the great Hebrew prophets, complained, “For 23 years... the word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened.” I shall come back to Jeremiah.

We need to ask “Why. Why did they not listen, why do they not listen today?” because we need to know the answers to this.

In choosing to use the word prophecy today we are acknowledging that we are part of a continuing sacred tradition. In the Hebrew bible, what we call the Old Testament, prophecy comes through the great figures of the prophets. The prophet in Hebrew is referred to as *ish haruach* which means a person filled with the spirit of God. The prophets are giants in the landscape of the Hebrew scriptures, a series of extraordinary inspired men and women. Doreen has already reminded us that there were women as well as men, though mostly the women's words have not been preserved and apart from one or two like Huldah and Miriam, we do not even know their names.

In the Hebrew tradition the prophet is someone who is chosen by God. Their task is to stand in the presence of God, hear God's pain and love for the world and transmit it to God's people. The prophet does not decide to be a prophet. He or she is called and responds to God's call often hesitantly or even unwillingly. The prophet is then filled with God's spirit, *ish haruach* and then speaks in God's voice. God told Ezekiel: 'I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth so that you shall be speechless.... But when I speak with you I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God'. And Jeremiah cried out “There is in my heart as it were a burning fire... and I am

weary with holding it in and I cannot.”

So the prophet utters God's words because he can do no other. But who must he speak them to? This is the crucial element, the absolute essence of Hebrew prophecy. He must prophesy both to his own community and to those in power. This triangular relationship with God, the prophet, the people and the kings is at the heart of what the Hebrew prophet is about strengthening his community and speaking truth to the power of the kings. This is a courageous and a daunting role to play.

He names where the people and the ruler are being faithful and where they have gone astray, he affirms them, but he criticises. He calls repeatedly for Teshuvah, returning to God. He warns of the consequences of continuing on the wrong path, he both belongs and he challenges. The prophet is of the people, speaking the words of God from among the people both to the people and to the king. He recalls the people and their rulers to what is at the heart of their beliefs: this is who we are. and “what does the Lord require of us?”

This role of standing both within and apart from the tradition, of belonging and constantly challenging, makes a prophet a strange and isolated person. Abraham Heschel who was a great Jewish philosopher, mystic, and activist of the 20th century has described it in this way. "The prophet is a lonely figure, his standards are too high, his stature too great and his concern too intense for other men to share. Living on the highest peak, he has no company except God."

Now, this is worrying if what we are looking for is a model of prophecy that is both inspired and effective, that reaches those it intends to change. Because what we often find in the Hebrew model with a few exceptions, is almost a builtin distancing. As Heschel has described it, God on the highest peak with the prophet and the people and the king a long way off.

In Deuteronomy we read that after God had spoken out of the fire and given Moses the Ten Commandments, the elders and heads of the tribe, shaken by what they had overheard of the encounter, said to Moses, “If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer we shall die. For what mortal ever heard the voice of the living God speak out of the fire as we did and lived. You go closer’, [this is to Moses] ‘you go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you and we will listen and do it.”

You can almost hear them shrinking back. The people felt that having heard God speak once they had gone to the limits of what they could endure. To hear God's voice directly exposed them to the heart of the divine fire and they wanted to withdraw to a safe distance, to have God's word in future mediated to them through someone else. This is familiar to us today, but there is a builtin difficulty for the prophet. The purpose is to connect, to transmit. If the people are reluctant to come close to God's presence how can the prophet reproduce God's fire for them. And if people miss the fire do they also miss the force of the message?

This is the paradox of biblical prophecy. It is a challenge from God to do God's work in the world. It takes over the prophet's whole life and it may fail. We inherit a legacy of inspiration, courage, and spiritual power, but also a role model with built-in limitations. Sometimes the prophets influenced those in power as Nathan the prophet did with King David. |At other times they were ignored. Living on the highest peak with no company except God, they sometimes failed to transmit their message. We, too, in our own times can be faithful for long periods without apparently succeeding in conveying God's word. We know the heartbreak of this. And we can be successful, and we know that joy.

We need to reflect this week on why this happens, what we can learn from it and what if anything we are doing about it.

But after generations of Hebrew prophets we have a mystery: The line of prophets suddenly came to an end in the late 6th century BCE after the Jews who returned from captivity in Babylon had rebuilt the temple. No new prophets emerged. No one understood why. The power of the Holy Spirit that enabled the prophets to speak the word of God seemed not to be active amongst them. The rabbis eventually told the people, "Since the death of the prophets Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi the Holy Spirit departed from Israel."

The Holy Spirit departed from Israel. The effect of this on the continuing Jewish tradition has been profound. Prophecy now belonged to the past, what needed to be revealed had been revealed. New self-proclaimed prophets were regarded with suspicion. This is something that Jews still believe today, though they have no single explanation for why it should be said. They give many reasons. They will tell you, as my Jewish friends and teachers tell me, "Prophecy ended when the Holy Spirit departed from Israel."

So today the Jewish community turns to the bible and their holy texts for inspiration, to be studied and prayed with and explored, but they do not expect contemporary human prophesy. As a Quaker I feel some sadness at this and some bewilderment and I asked one of the rabbis, "But why? Why after all those years did God suddenly stop trying to communicate with God's people? Why did the Holy Spirit abandon them?" The rabbi smiled at this impertinent Quaker and said, "That's a very good question, Marion, and we don't know the answer."

We don't know the answer either and I would reject the Christian supersessionist belief that God switched God's favour from one chosen people to another. I think it is a desolate and a courageous place for a people of God to stand in because it means they are listening only for God's voice. And it raises for us the ongoing question of the truth of scriptural revelation and the truth of contemporary revelation, because as Quakers we want to have both and we need to ask where do we feel the Holy Spirit at work?

So into this extraordinary absence of Jewish prophecy came Jesus. Would we want to name Jesus as a prophet? Most Christian commentators now say, yes, this would be how Jesus would understand himself and how he was seen by his Jewish followers during his lifetime - as a prophet in the Hebrew tradition, mediating God's word to God's people and

to the authorities. Christians of course would want to add that Jesus was much more, that he was divine, that he was the redeemer, but at the time the role he played was in line with the Jewish prophetic tradition. The people felt his authority. As we have seen, people know when there has been a prophet among them. The people heard the true voice of God through Jesus and acknowledged him as a prophet.

His role may have been familiar, but his teaching was new. The Sermon on the Mount offers us a radical and empowering way to realise the kingdom of heaven. It begins with a blessing and it ends with a call to action. So the way was opened for something to come into being which moved on from the old prophetic tradition and challenged the idea that after hundreds of years the Holy Spirit was no longer active and alive.

Beginning with the extraordinary events of Pentecost the followers of Jesus began to experience the Holy Spirit for themselves in a transforming and empowering way. Not just a few lone individuals but as a gathered group. The spirit flowed among them. It is difficult to overestimate the wonder and significance of this.

They understood this spirit to come from God, it empowered them to teach and expand their beliefs. Prophecy was alive among them again, but the single prophet had become the prophetic community.

Paul told the Corinthians, "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts and especially that you may prophesy... those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation... those who prophesy build up the church.. I would like all of you to prophesy." This is an extraordinary development. Paul's phrase, "I would like all of you to prophesy" takes us into a new way of being a community of prophecy. Instead of being the fearful community of Moses, standing a long way off, unwilling and unable to hear the word of God directly, dependent on their prophet to mediate God to them, we have an empowered prophetic community, sharing the gift, able to hear and respond to the Holy Spirit directly.

But is this the same kind of prophecy that we find in the Hebrew scriptures? Are we right to use the same word for it?

It has many of the traditional characteristics, it is inspired by the Spirit, it empowers and builds the community, it challenges, it recalls us to God. But it is no longer dependent on lone voices to lead and expound, it is instead collective and egalitarian. This understanding of prophecy is what Christians developed, what the Jewish tradition stands apart from and what early Quakers rediscovered 350 years ago as they felt the Spirit moving among them.

So as Quakers today we have inherited a long prophetic tradition of richness and complexity and it is all ours to use. Today in the Quaker family we interpret prophecy in different ways. Yet I believe there is an underlying unity in our practice and if we understand our tradition as a whole we can make this diversity a gift and not a stumbling block. Here are some of the key elements:

- Quaker prophecy is the experience of the Word of God alive among us, directly felt and recognised. It can come out of silence, speech, scripture or song, however we worship, however we minister.
 - There is always a message of some kind: enlightening, clarifying, and demanding.
 - The message is intended for us and for others. Who they are may be familiar- those in our meetings, or still unknown- those we must reach out to. These are the tasks of teaching and of mission.
 - There can be both individual Quaker prophets and also prophetic Quaker communities, both have their strengths and their limitations.
 - George Fox never felt he needed to verify his leadings, but he noted that whenever he consulted scripture he found them confirmed. After the fall of James Nayler Friends came to understand that prophecy must be tested and we still do this today. Some of us choose to confirm leadings by reference to scripture, others by reference to the collective discernment of the gathered meeting, but the leading from God is always primary for all of us.
- Quaker prophecy today, as in the Hebrew tradition, has the same dual purpose, the same triangular relationship with God - to enlighten, nurture, and extend the spiritual community and also to speak truth to those in power, to take prophetic action, to press for change in the world. We can do both. We must do both, both are holy.

Abraham Heschel, a Jew, marched from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King in 1965. It was a bloody confrontational event, but it was for him a deeply spiritual occasion. When he returned, he told his daughter, "I felt as if my legs were praying."

There is a whole spectrum of prophetic possibility open to us as Quakers calling for our attention. Do we practise it all, or do we settle for just a part, just one place on the spectrum? I see our diversity as an uncomfortable challenge that we hold out to each other for all of us to be more than we are being at present. Some of us concentrate on silent waiting, some on proclamation, some on mission, some on social action. All of these things are part of the prophetic tradition and maybe none of us fulfils them all. So we serve as uncomfortable reminders and loving prompts to each other; Friend, is there something you are neglecting?

So what kind of Quaker prophetic voice is needed today? What will enable people to hear the voice of God, what will bring the changes we long to hear? Let us go back to Jeremiah for a moment, prophesying for 23 years without anyone listening to him. His name has been immortalised for this. The dictionary says:

a Jeremiah: someone who is pessimistic about the present and who foresees a calamitous future; a person given to woeful lamentation and complaining.

I don't know about you, but I find it incredibly hard to listen to someone filled with woeful lamentation for 23 minutes, let alone 23 years. The Hebrew prophets were always ready to blame the people for refusing to hear the word of God. But I have to wonder,

was it something to do with the way the word of God was being preached? Did the prophets fall into the trap of expressing their own frustration and anger? Did their own despairing voices sometimes speak louder than God's?

I was recently at a conference when a Friend who was deeply concerned about a matter of great spiritual importance stood up and lectured us all for a long time about how urgent this was, how we must all stop what we were doing and turn our energies to this one problem. We listened with sinking hearts. When he finished and sat down the person next to me leaned across and whispered "This nagging has to stop"

I am sure there is a word in everyone's language for nagging. It is persistent, useless scolding and we all do it. How can we help each other from falling into this trap? Let us think for a moment of the selfappointed prophets that we all know, that we all turn away from. They are well intentioned, but they drown us in their urgency and their fear. They make us feel guilty and inadequate, they blame us, they depress and immobilise us, they are doing their best, but they are having no effect. This nagging has to stop.

If we want to bring the kingdom of heaven we must have insight, skills, compassion, abounding love, and methods that work. We must be people who fill other people with hope, not despair. It is no good being right for 23 years if noone is listening to us.

Effective prophecy energises and encourages, it acknowledges people's failures and inadequacies but it doesn't blame, it comforts and consoles. It believes in people. It is an invitation to return to God. |And because it is deeply rooted in God it can bring others to God's presence. Open Isaiah at chapter 40 and hear the unknown prophet we called 2nd Isaiah pour out love and consolation: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned." This is a prophetic voice that we can respond it to, it lifts our hearts and renews our strength, we can as 2nd Isaiah says, we can "ount up with wings like eagles."

So what do we need in prophecy that will enable people to hear the voice of God?It is very simple: Jean Leclerq, a Benedictine, has said: "We must love the age we live in. From the point of view of faith the best age for each of us is the one God has placed us in, the one He has given us which we must give back to Him".

We must love the age we live in. Sometimes this is very hard to do, but it is our task.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Andif I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing".

Effective prophets work from a place of love. They nurture us, they inspire us to engage with our faith in deeper and deeper ways. We lead committed lives which return us

always to our spiritual core. It is circular. Our outward lives are shaped from within, our actions in the world bring us closer to God and we live God's truth in the world.

Because whatever form it takes, prophecy is essentially mystical. God breaks through. The world is imperfect. Dudu has described it in our programme as a broken and still breaking world. But it is wholly of God, wholly divine. The prophets are those that enable us to see that God is always available to us, the kingdom is always about us. Rosa Parks, one of my inspirations, one of the enablers of the American Civil Rights Movement, sat down in the middle of a bus and enacted the kingdom of heaven, a world of justice and equality. And God's voice was heard. One of the people sitting at the back, unable to move, said later: "It was holy in that bus."

When we can prophesy with this kind of love, this kind of clarity, this kind of holiness, God's voice will be heard.

We have come a long way as a people of God, we have grown and changed, we have found new ways and held on to old ways. We are still gathered, still waiting to hear God's voice, waiting for prophecy to flourish amongst us. We will hear God's voice again and again this week saying familiar and comforting things, saying challenging and uncomfortable things. In love. Let us listen with open hearts.

There is a Hebrew blessing for absolutely everything, and there is a special blessing for a moment like this, and I would like to end with it. It acknowledges that we have come on a long journey to arrive where we are today, we have been held safe, like a child in the womb, nurtured and fed, and now delivered safely into this moment to do what we are called to do next. I will say it in Hebrew and then in English.

Baruch atah, adonai eloheinu, melech ha 'olam, shehechianu, v'kimanu, v'higianu, lazman hazeh.

Blessed are you Lord our God creator of the universe who has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us forth to this moment.

DUDUZILE MTSHAZO: We will remain in worship and we will respond as the spirit leads us.

[Ministry out of open worship]

Speaker 1

Among the first words of Jesus recorded in our gospels after he began his ministry was when he was asked to read in his own synagogue. As he read the very words of this morning from Isaiah, the people were astonished, but some of the leaders were angry enough to want to throw him over a cliff, or to drive him out of Nazareth. That did not stop Jesus in his ministry and prophecy. May we not falter as we encounter sometimes that anger, but let us also move on in our ministry and prophecy.

Speaker 2

The prophets who wrote the words reveal what God has inspired them to say thousands of years ago, but if I look at my life now today I find many of their words very applicable in my life today describing exactly the situation of many people in the Middle East and in Palestine. I find the message of the prophet is a message that is courageous, stating the grief about the situations in our world at the same time insisting on exposing the principalities and powers and what is happening which is not in line with God's will. I mean if I go to Lamentations or if I go to Ezekiel, " They mislead my people when they say 'peace, peace' when there is no peace. For me these words when they are repeated again and again and again, for me I don't see them as maybe nagging or making others feel guilty, it's the reminder, it's a constant reminder that our situation is unbearable and we should do something about it. The prophets were not just nagging about it, the cry of grief and lamentation was a cry coming from the heart, a cry that led to action and the action led to hope so it was an act of subversion and an act of hope, an act of liberation and an act of unifying the community to act together to transform the structures of domination, oppression and violence. May we all be strengthened today to really hear the cries of those who lament, lament their situation and not get upset by it. If it is difficult for us to hear it, how much more difficult it is for them to live with it, to bear with it in their lives day in day out.

Speaker 3

I have been reminded this morning of the words of a chorus that I learned while I was a child and I was thinking that I cannot change other people or anything else, but the words of this chorus came to me.

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me, all his wondrous compassion and purity, oh thou spirit divine, all my nature refine until the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.

Speaker 4

I am not a biblical scholar, I read the bible and ask questions and I would like to ask the help of others who know more in helping me to discern. As I was reading one day in the book of Samuel, there is a part that seems to me a complete critical turning point in the history of Israel, although I don't find the commentators seeing it as significant so maybe I am totally off. In Samuel 8 starting with verse 4 it says: So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Rammah, they said to him you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways, now appoint a king to lead us such as all other nations have. But when they said give us a king to lead us this displeased Samuel so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him, Listen to all that the people are saying to you, it is not you that they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods so they are doing to you. Now listen to them, but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king will do. Samuel told all the words to the people who were asking him for a king, he said this is what a king will do: he will take your sons, and make them serve with his chariots in horses and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of 50s and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest and others to make weapons of war and equipment for his

chariots; he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers, he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your men servants and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes you will cry out for relief from the king that you have chosen and the Lord will not answer you in that day. But the people refused to listen to Samuel. No, they said, we want a king over us, then we will be like all the other nations with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.

Up until this time in the Bible, Israel had no king, they were led by prophets and judges. For me I see God in this chapter like a loving father with a rebellious teenager saying "this is not the right way" and the teenager says "this is really what I want" and so he do not force Israel to the right way, he lets them find out for themselves. He tries, God tries to ameliorate the consequences, he helps to chose a king that is more humble, he sends prophets to help advise the king when the king is taking wrong action, but I see a change here in that the prophets start to kind of lobby the king rather than to bring the voice of God to the people. I used to be very upset by calling God king, there was a time when in all of my worship and prayers I took out all male language, but now when I see it in the light of this verse in Samuel, I see that it is taking away the earthly kingship. When we say God is king, it is saying we have no other king.

I wondered if Jesus coming is a culmination of this part of history, that Jesus is king of the Jews affirming that God is our king, we have no other king.

Speaker 5

We have been alerted to the power of love and what it can do for each of us, I am less concerned with what the leaders plan to do or are doing, but more concerned with those of us who belong to the first world population of the world, roughly about 1.2 billion people out of 6.2 billion -- what we can do? It is historically true that each of us were nurtured, educated in a form of exclusion morality in which we say that certain things are right for us in the group and we shall pursue that with vigour and those same things do not apply for those outside our group and we shall exclude them. Every group seems to do this all over the world and as a result it has contributed to a class of people who may be called poor, who live on less than \$2 per head per day and who have to forego about 30,000 of their own people daily to poverty deaths. When we get to know about this we immediately say that is not something which I want to happen, it is not something that I wish to contribute to, I never knew that anything which I did was bringing this about. But there is something we can do and that is that we can ask ourselves, are we ready to include them on their minimum needs for the future, forget about the past? Sure we were not there, we did not know about it. Now we know about it, are we prepared to include their minimum needs for the future and am I addressing the problem intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually under worship -- prepared to bridge the gap between my own conditioned morality and this new type of morality I may affirm. One way to address that particular situation is to say, no poverty deaths in my name. No

poverty deaths in my name. It is easily said, but am I really in a position to make that transition from where I am currently placed? This is a question which a person who takes their spiritual responsibility extremely seriously could perhaps consider looking at and, further, try to extend it to other groups.

So one question we could address is, are we prepared to meet the minimum needs through worship? Thank you.

Morning session, Sunday 12 August (1) Worship and Doreen O'Dowd

Doreen Dowd addressed the Triennial as follows

“Good morning, Friends.

“It is a privilege and a responsibility to speak to you during this meeting for worship. I am sure there were other Friends who shared my reaction on hearing the theme for this Triennial, 'Finding the prophetic voice for our time'. I immediately thought of the Old Testament prophets whose words and deeds are recorded in the Bible. Presumably those who chose the theme were not expecting to set Friends up as prognosticators or seekers with an unusual ability to foretell the future. Rather, in this context prophetic has the meaning, as my dictionary confirms, of inspired by God.

“I am reminded of our Meetings for Worship for attention to business when we use not just our intelligence or our expert knowledge, but rather seek to find God's will in organising the affairs of the church.

“It seemed a good starting point to look at who some of these men were. They were prophets, but we don't know very much about them. Firstly, some of them came from very humble origins. Moses, David and Amos were all minding sheep when they received their divine call. Elijah was ploughing, Ezekiel, Nehemiah and some of the others were prisoners of war.

“Secondly, several of them felt unequal to the task. Moses complained so much to God about his lack of eloquence that he was finally given Aaron to be his spokesman. Jeremiah said 'I am but a child'. Isaiah confessed 'I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips', but when he accepted the forgiveness and cleansing offered by God he was able to say 'here am I, send me'.

“The environments in which they prophesied were very varied. At times Israel was materially wealthy, complacent that its military might could not be challenged, while the civil society was corrupt and promiscuous. Intermarriage with neighbouring tribes had introduced temple prostitution and worship of nature and fertility gods.

“At other times, the prophet was speaking to a people in captivity in exile, wondering if they would ever again see their native land let alone fulfil their destiny of bringing to birth the messiah. Did you recognise the music By the waters of Babylon I sat down and wept?

“The messages of the prophets were very specific to the people to whom they spoke, but at the same time carried a universal message that can still speak to us today. So this Triennial can produce a message that is applicable to all the yearly meetings represented here, although some of us live in countries racked by hunger, by poverty, by AIDS, while others of us are surrounded by wealth and materialism. The common factor in the message of the prophets is restoration of the relationship between God and those who would worship Him in spirit and in truth. Those of you who think the Old Testament is only about battles and bloodshed should look again at some of its images of God: A faithful husband, a bird protecting its nestlings and of course 'the Lord is My Shepherd'.

“It is interesting that the only reference I could find in the New Testament to the purpose of prophecy is 'so that the church may be edified'. Although we have few details of New Testament prophecy, the young church needed divinely guided insights in how to deal with its internal structure and how to deal with the pagan world around it as it explored the meaning of the gospel of Jesus.

“There are undoubtedly some Friends who are already thinking this is all about words and ideas whereas I just want to feed the hungry, reduce dependence on arms, care for the environment, so that future generations can have clean air and water, but the prophets often inspired practical action. Nehemiah comes over like the rather bossy clerk of a large Premises Committee obsessed with rebuilding Jerusalem, abandoning his donkey so that he could clamber over the rubble to inspect enemy damage to the city walls. More than once, the words of the prophet led to the removal of pagan shrines. Although priests and prophets had specific roles in Israel, all of the people were expected to behave as children of God, farmers and merchants were to trade honestly and to treat their employees well - surely good Quaker principles.

“These are some impressions of some biblical prophets. They were ordinary people, aware of their weaknesses, but willing to be used by God and to share insights with their communities. Have these ancient Hebrews a message for our 21 century world? To bring the question a little nearer in time, I believe the New Testament is also about restoring the relationship between God and human kind. Isnot Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son about restoring communication between our Heavenly Father and his child?

“Here also in my experience lies the huge challenge for present day Friends. Can we with our enormous diversity of outlook still find a united message for the 21st century? You are here as guests of Ireland Yearly Meeting and for a variety of historical and social reasons Friends in Ireland reflect the breadth of diversity that is found amongst Friends across the world. I know that even amongst the small group of Irish Friends here this morning, there is a great range of understanding about who Jesus is and his significance for the world today. How should we interpret the Bible, was Jesus an inspired Jewish teacher, even a prophet, but only one of the people who have had a special perception of the nature of God or is he the only begotten son of God the father, fully divine, fully human, who died on a cross as an expression of God's profound love for us and our need of restoration to wholeness and who rose again triumphing over death?

“Personally, I claim Jesus as my saviour, my guide, my enabler; and that is not a creed, it is an experience. There are Irish and other Friends who cannot use such language, perhaps even find it offensive, yet they are very committed to living their lives according to gospel order and their integrity constantly challenges my way of life. Irish Friends have recently had to confront our different interpretations of the gospel as we updated our Book of Christian Experience, but we have managed with tears and with struggles to agree to continue worshipping together and sharing our search for God's will. I hope this Triennial will witness such love and grace also.

“Early Friends and those who have followed them believed that authentic Christian faith has to find expression in action feeding the hungry, freeing the slaves, seeking reconciliation of conflicts. In the words of William Penn "true godliness don't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it".

“I wonder if doing good works can sometimes become a ploy to occupy our minds and keep us too busy to consider our relationship with God? Is it true godliness that is enabling us? The best loved chapter in the Bible tells us that if I give all my goods to the poor but have not love, I gain nothing. It is not just head knowledge that we need but heart knowledge. It would be well to remember during the coming week that even the gift of prophecy is nothing, it is useless if it does not spring from love.

“1 John 4:19 tells us that we love because God first loved us.

“What then is our or God's prophetic message of love to the refugee mother watching her child die of hunger or malaria, to the politician promising bread and circuses or cheap oil with a view to re-

election, to your workmate who thinks happiness is a new car, to the friend sitting quietly in the corner of your meeting. You are going to spend the next week seeking to hear more plainly the message that God has for Friends in these days, for our society and to share with the wider world.

“While we value our heritage we should not be burdened by tradition. We cannot relive the experiences of previous generations, but we can learn from them. George Fox was a Seeker, but started finding truth when he heard a voice which said “there is one even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition”.

“Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, I don't know how many times in my life I have sung that hymn, I have prayed that prayer, but the words are just as important to me today as they were when I first learned them 50 or 60 years ago. Most of us came today or yesterday or the day before, probably in a rush, fussing over airlines and that we haven't got everything ready for those people who are coming, in various different guises we were all uptight. The words of that poem or prayer are just as important now. ‘Drop thy still dues of quietness until all our striving cease, take from our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace’.

“One of the problems for the prophets in the Old Testament was how do you tell a true prophet from a false prophet? There were so many prophets, some of them were professional prophets. Even with Jeremiah there was a great argument after the city of Jerusalem had fallen and Jeremiah told the people that it had fallen because they didn't worship God and the people said all these troubles came upon us because we stopped worshipping the queen of heaven. How do we tell the true from the false? It is our problem too. There is such a clamour of voices, journalists, politicians, religious leaders. The New Testament says test the spirits. We have to be able to test to hear what is true. Love is one of those tests.

“One test I have been thinking of is humility, the true prophets weren't saying 'look at me, look at me, listen to what I am saying', they were saying ‘listen to God, listen to the voice of God in your own heart, see what is being said to you’. Another test I think is persistence and patience.

“If you look at the people who worked for the abolition of the North Atlantic slave trade, they worked for years and years and years doing the work, believing, hoping, converting people until finally it happened. I think another test is whether people live it themselves, if you look at John Woolman, he lived what he was teaching. Fox said ‘let your lives preach’.

“If we are to be a prophetic people we have to be the message we are preaching.”

[End of Doreen's introduction]

[MINISTRY OUT OF OPEN WORSHIP]

Speaker 1:

“This is from Jeremiah chapter 4. “If you will return oh Israel return to me, declares the Lord. If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear as surely as the Lord lives then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory”. This is what the Lord said to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem “break up your unploughed ground and do not sow among thorns, circumcise yourself to the Lord, circumcise your hearts”.

“Jeremiah was also and always a bit foul-mouthed. We do not swear and circumcision hurts. There is a lot of words in here that would turn Friends off, but glory be to God, he came to us as an interpreter in the heart. A few days ago I thanked God to have been given a liberal universal

translation of foul-mouthed Jeremiah. Please take a look at chapter 4 of Jeremiah with me and let's remake it in our hearts.

“If you will return to me oh Friend return to me and return me to your heart, declares the Friend of friends. Some world Friends may be surprised to know that some world Friends are allergic to some names of God. I will tell you for instance King of kings. There are good decent democratic Friends who hear the words King of kings and go oh -- and the Spirit is in them.

“If you put away the world's busyness that separates us, that separates you from the Spirit, you will no longer go astray. If in a truthful, just and righteous way you affirm, why swear? Surely as the Friend of friends lives in the heart then the nations will be blessed by that friendship and the glory will dwell in each of our hearts. Break your unploughed ground and do not throw the seed of God's love on those hard bits of the heart that won't receive it. Cut out from your heart those hard bits of the heart and put the seed in the wounds. Then you will grow, irrigate it.

“Friends, we have to interpret not just for each other, but we have to interpret in each other's heart. We have to gather and we have to let ourselves speak all the names of God that makes our heart go a-flaring. We have to confess that some names of God are difficult because of our history. If you come from a Latin American indigenous community and you felt that an empire came over with a cross and took your land whacking the cross about, there is a truth in that and it has to be recognised. We also have names of God, of the God that makes our heart take fire and there are names of God we say that hurt other people of goodwill and we have to know that all and circumcise our hearts. May we continue together to sing out the names of God and to learn how it is that the Friend of friends calls us to say his name to each other.”

[End of first spoken ministry]

Speaker 2:

“When I was reading the study guide and meeting with Friends in the Netherlands and working with the theme for this Triennial, I found not only in myself, but I also heard through the words of Dutch Friends that we have difficulty in attaching the word prophet or prophecy to our own personal lives, to bring these words down to ground level. I have heard names of Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King or Gandhi several times, but I also have a name and how do I visualise prophecy in my own daily life. It seems such a big word and I have two feet on the ground. This past week I had the privilege of taking part in the pre-Triennial in Northern Ireland and one of the questions that arose was how to see this thing of serving cups of tea to wives of prisoners who want to visit their husbands? They have to wait, possibly quite a long time, and Friends in Belfast started pouring cups of tea and they organised a mini bus to shuttle these wives to the prison gate and back again. As participants in a Triennial we, I think, most of us were surprised, amazed to hear that in almost 40 years' time this has grown to an organisation with 40 employees, Quaker cottage and a Quaker house, in all a huge organisation.

“We were pondering, Is this the way to do it, start with a cup of tea and just see how it grows? Maybe we didn't answer that question, but I am very impressed with this example.”

[John Sheldon]:

“Now, Friends, we will conclude our worship this morning with the hymn Be Thou My Vision”.

(Song sung)

[Charles G. Lamb]:

“I wonder just before we separate, could we have a moment of prayer.

“Our dear loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for having brought us here safely. We thank you for the knowledge of your presence here with us. We remember those that we have left at home, some unwell, some in hospital, we ask you Lord to be with them and with the many who are remembering us who are privileged to be here. We pray Lord that as we read in John’s gospel that the true light which lighteth every man to cometh into this world might shine upon us here as we gather, that our hearts may search, that we may be tried, yes, for some of us possibly even in the fire, that during our time here we might experience a cleansing of our ways, a changing of our ways, that our eyes might be opened, and that we might be found obedient to walk to your foot steps. You have said ‘I am the way, the truth and the life’. We pray Lord that that might be all of our experience as we gather here and that we might hear that still small voice which corrects us, which challenges us, and guides us in the right direction and so Lord we come before you this morning with thankful hearts. Renew our right spirit within us and fill us with the presence of thy Holy Spirit. This we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Thank you very much, friends, for joining with us in worship this morning. I understand there may be some notices; is that correct? No notices at the moment. So there is tea and coffee next door and we are back here again at 11:00, thank you.